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ABSTRACT

Research on the role of the first language (L1) in second language (L2) learning is reviewed, offering historical background but focusing primarily on work within the last two decades. Attention is given mainly to two aspects of the L1-L2 relationship: positive transfer of knowledge from L1 in the process of learning L2, and negative transfer, or interference. Related theories are traced from the 1960s, and empirical research from the 1970s. Research topics examined include L2 learner errors either traceable to or not traceable to L1, L2 development independent of L1, production and reception errors, and transfer of properties shared by L1 and L2, including language universals. More recent research on specific constructions promoting or inhibiting transfer, on learner perceptions of L1 and L2 in transfer, and on transfer in specific languages is highlighted. It is concluded that in view of mixed research results and the limitations of existing knowledge, it is best to view L1 as a contributing factor in L2 development. (Contains 62 references.) (MSE)

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Hashim H. Noor

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SOME IMPLICATIONS ON THE ROLE OF THE MOTHER TONGUE IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Abstract:

Among the large number of unsolved problems in applied linguistics the role of the first language (L1) in second language (L2)-learning occupies a central place. The term most frequently used to indicate the learner's reliance on L1 is transfer, and during the last decade investigations of this phenomenon have been proliferating all over the world. In this paper, we will try to through some lights on the role of the mother tongue or the L1 on the L2 acquisition process. It will be shown how L1 is considered as the most determinant of L2 acquisition where L2 learners will use both positively or negatively to help them sift the L2 data in the input and to perform as best as they can in the L2. All of this will be based mainly on the results of the empirical studies which will be reviewed here and the views of some scholars in this area.

INTRODUCTION

Among the large number of unsolved problems in applied linguistics the role of the first language (L1) in second language (L2)-learning occupies a central place. The term most frequently used to indicate the learner's reliance on L1 is *transfer*, and during the last decade investigations of this phenomenon have been proliferating all over the world.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

From the thirties through the early sixties, language acquisition[2] was viewed primarily as a very complex stimulus/response type of behaviour where language was reduced to a set of habits. Diller (1978) points out that authors such as Bloomfield (1933) and Skinner (1957) along with a score of others held that language acquisition began with imitation of more and more complex model utterances until adult fluency was achieved. It was influence from this school of thought that prompted Lado (1957) to make the assertion that

> ....the use of a grammatical structure by a speaker depends heavily on habit. It would be well nigh impossible to think consciously of all the potential changes, expansions, and restrictions in uttering even a single sentence and still speak with anything approaching normal conversational speed. The average speaker has from early childhood reduced practically all the operation of his grammatical system to habit. (p. 58)

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[2] Second language *acquisition* is sometimes contrasted with second language *learning* on the assumption that the former refers to 'picking up a second language through exposure', whereas the latter refers to the 'conscious study of a second language'. However, this distinction is debatable (cf. Ellis, 1986:6), so *acquisition* and *learning* will be used interchangeably throughout this paper. If we wish to use either of these terms with a more specific meaning, they will be italicized and their reference made explicit.

Lado maintained that acquisition of L2 was essentially a task of overcoming native language, i.e., L1, habits and learning in their place the habits of the target language, i.e., L2. Only those elements of the L2 which differed from L1 were considered important for learning, however, since it was assumed that habits from L1 were directly transferable to L2. Those elements in L2 which were most different from L1 were taken to be the most difficult to learn. An important part of this theory was "contrastive analysis" (CA), the goal of which was to identify and catalogue the structural differences and similarities between languages. (For example: see Stockwell, Bowen, and Martin (1965) which provides a CA of English and Spanish, and Sieny (1986) and Al-Bouq (1988) which provide a CA of English and Arabic). This information was supposed to aid in the planning of language-teaching materials which stressed the oral practice of the L2 sentences patterns. Since the ultimate goal of the learner was considered to be the learning of those habits which together made up L2, language study generally consisted of the repetition of hundreds of sentence patterns, which, it was hoped, would eventually become automatic. (As an example of this approach to L2 teaching/learning see Lado and Fries (1958)).

TRANSFER OR INTERFERENCE

The term *transfer* in language learning is defined by Odlin (1989) as:

> "....the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired." (p. 27)

This influence has two faces; the old known interference or negative transfer and positive transfer. *Positive transfer*, or *facilitation*, is transfer of skill or part of the native or any previously acquired language[3] (X) which facilitates the learning or has a positive influence on the command of a skill or part of the target language (Y) because of similarities between both skills. *Negative transfer*, or *interference*, is transfer of a skill X which impedes the learning or has a negative influence on the command of a skill Y because of differences between both skills (cf. van Els et al., 1984:49).

Transfer, or the CA hypothesis, has been incorporated into second language acquisition (SLA) theory in both a weak and a strong form (cf. Wardhaugh, 1970). In the weak version, transfer is a tool used to account for or *explain* the errors which actually occur. There is no attempt to predict. On the other hand, within the strong version, transfer is a basis for predicting which patterns in the L2 will be learnt most readily and which will prove most troublesome. The strong version or claim has generally been made under the following two assumptions: (1) the chance of L2 learning problems occurring will increase proportionally to the linguistic differences between L1 and L2: linguistic differences give rise to *negative transfer* or interference; (2) The chance of L2 learning problems occurring decreases proportionally to the absence of linguistic differences between L1 and L2: absence of linguistic differences gives rise to *positive transfer* or facilitation.

It was not until the late 1960s and the early seventies that the CA hypothesis was submitted to empirical investigation. Were learner' errors traceable to the effects of the L1? Whereas previously it had been assumed that the L2 learner transferred as much as

[3] This includes skills of learning or any part of the already acquired language; such as: vocabulary, structures, tenses, word order, etc.

possible from his L1, and that such transfer was largely, if not solely responsible for L2 production, the new position held that transfer was minimal. Many researchers appeared to take the position that the L2 grammar was constructed with little or no recourse to the L1 grammar.

For example, Dulay and Burt (1974) argue that a large proportion of grammatical errors in their study involving native Spanish-speaking children who were learning English could not be explained by L1 interference. Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982), in reference to earlier acquisition sequence studies, state that "In neither child nor adult L2 performance do the majority of the grammatical errors reflect the learner's L1." They further cite Milon (1974), Gillis and Weber (1976), and Gonzalez and Elijah (1979), as examples of studies in which the occurrence of errors attributable to L1 is minimal. Ervin-Tripp (1974), in a study involving English speaking children who were learning French, and Boyd (1975), in a study with English speakers learning Spanish, also conclude that the incidence of error attributable to the L1 was low. These investigators argue that production errors were more developmental than interference related. According to these researchers, the errors which appeared are similar to those errors produced in L1 acquisition. LoCoco (1975) found a slightly higher rate of interference-related errors for adults learning Spanish and German (approximately 11-23%), although overall, the percentage is small compared to the total number of errors. Ioup and Kruse (1977) found, in a test involving grammatical judgement of relative clauses, that L1 showed no correlation with the ability to make correct judgements. In a recent study, Noor (1991) found, in a comprehension test of the acquisition of English temporal conjunctions by foreign language learners, that, although somewhat weak evidence of transfer (whether positive or negative) was observed in the results, the low proficiency students did not show a clear evidence that they rely mainly on their mother tongue (Arabic) to understand and process these conjunctions.

However, in a study which attempts to investigate the interference (or the negative transfer) of Arabic in the use of English prepositions by Arab students, Mehdi (1981) found that omission of prepositions or selection of incorrect ones was made when equivalents were non-existent in Arabic. Mehdi further explained these in terms of Arab learners' attempt to establish a one-to-one correspondence between English and Arabic prepositions. He concluded that interference, or negative transfer, from Arabic in the use of English prepositions is visible. El-Sayed (1982) investigated the errors made by Saudi freshman students of English. Errors were first identified, then classified into verbs, nouns, articles, prepositions, and adjectives. Error sources were explained in terms of interlingual (L1 influence) and intralingual (developmental) errors. He found that negative transfer from L1 is the main source of errors.

To try to show that L2 develops independently from the native language, a number of acquisition sequence studies which followed the design of Brown (1973) were conducted with L2 learners. On the basis of these studies it was argued that, for a set of grammatical structures in English, all learners could be shown to master the structures in a similar sequential order regardless of L1 differences (e.g., see the sequences that were obtained by Dulay and Burt (1974) for children learning an L2, and by Bailey, Madden, and Krashen (1974) for adult L2 learners in Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, 1982:210). This argument led to a consideration of the possibility that L2 learners followed a universal route in acquiring the target language. This possibility was encouraged by research in L1 acquisition which showed that children learning their mother tongue followed a highly predictable route in the acquisition of structures such as sequence is easier to perform than simultaneity temporal structures in both

comprehension and production manners (e.g., see Keller-Cohen, 1974; Tibbits, 1980; Natsopoulos and Abadzi, 1986) and a range of grammatical morphemes (e.g., Brown, 1973).

Most of the aforementioned studies attempted to show that transfer from L1 does not figure greatly in L2 production errors. One can argue here, as Odlin (1989) indicates, that there are many theoretical difficulties with minimising the importance of transfer in SLA. One problem with many of these studies is their focus on errors. While errors no doubt provide important evidence for the strength or weakness of particular L1 influences, they are far from being the only evidence (p. 35). Another problem lies in an assumption frequently made in the consideration of language universals: namely, that if universal developmental sequences play a major role in acquisition, transfer cannot play much of a role (as indicated by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, 1982:210). In fact, however, there are reasons to believe that transfer or cross-linguistic influences work in tandem with the psychological factors governing developmental sequences (cf. Odlin, 1989:97 ff.). Still another difficulty is the assumption sometimes still made that theories of transfer are inextricably linked to theories of habit formation. Yet by no means is there any necessary connection between such theories (p. 25 ff.). One can also argue here, in addition to these points, that the authors of such studies concerned only with negative transfer or interference. One has to recognise that positive transfer may also occur. If the position is taken that underlying the world's languages is some kind of shared basic organisation (i.e., Universal Grammar, cf. Chomsky, 1981; Cook, 1985), and that fundamentally they are more alike than they are different, then it is possible that the use of very basic linguistic universals (such as the fact that all languages have nouns, verbs, syntax, etc.), as well as the transfer of less universal properties shared by L1 and L2 (such as notions of person or tense) may not only occur frequently but actually be a necessary and integral part of L2 learning.

Evidence which refutes the position that properties shared by L1 and L2 (including language universals) are freely transferred is not particularly strong. Such studies as exist generally focus on surface word order phenomena, which says very little concerning transfer (or the lack of it) of fundamental linguistic universals. For example, Schachter (1974) showed a higher incidence of error in English relative clause production by native Arabic and Persian speakers than by native Chinese and Japanese speakers. This result is important since in certain respects, Schachter argues, Arabic and Persian relative clauses are more English-like than either Chinese or Japanese relative clauses. Parameters which Schachter utilised for determining similarity or difference include: 1) position of clause relative to the head noun; 2) type of relative clause marking (i.e., overt vs. null relative markers); 3) retention of a "relative clause reflex", or resumptive pronoun, within the clause. Roughly speaking, Schachter maintained that Arabic and Persian relative clauses were more English-like than relative clauses in the other languages concerned with respect to (1) and (2), but that there was a degree of variation with respect to (3), Arabic and Persian being the most different from English, Japanese being the most English-like. An important and revealing statistic in this study, however, is the number of attempts made at producing relative clauses by the various native language groups. The Chinese and Japanese speakers tended to avoid relative clauses altogether, while Arabic and Persian groups attempted to use them freely. With more attempts at production, there was more opportunity to err. It is possible that the Arabic and Persian speakers felt more comfortable using constructions that they were at least partly familiar with.

In view of the fact that little evidence exists to the contrary, the possibility of positive transfer should not be ruled out. In fact, the following paragraphs will argue that some L2 studies show that transfer undoubtedly plays a role in L2 production, especially with regard to semantics, but that there are certain constraints on its occurrence.

NEW LOOK AT TRANSFER

Such empirical research in the 1980s has led to new and ever more persuasive evidence for the importance of transfer studies or cross-linguistic studies[4] in all subsystems. This can be seen not only from the comprehensive bibliography of language transfer which recently appeared (Dechert, Brüggemeier and Füttere, 1984), but also from the number of recently specialised titles (e.g., Kellerman and Sharwood Smith, 1986; Ringbom, 1987; Dechert and Raupach, 1989; Odlin, 1989; etc.). A rather large number of studies comparing the grammar, vocabulary, and so forth of learners with different native languages indicate acquisition differences attributable to transfer or cross-linguistic influence (see for example: Gass, 1979a; Schachter and Rutherford, 1979; Ard and Homburg, 1983; Corder, 1983; Wode, 1983; Watanabe, 1984; White, 1985,1987; Schumann, 1986; Singler, 1988; Tushyeh, 1988; etc.).

Kellerman (1977), (1978), (1979), and (1983) addresses the question of whether or not the learner's perception of the native language and the target language affect his decision to transfer L1-based structure into L2. His hypothesis is that learners are aware, consciously or unconsciously, of the likelihood for certain L1 structures to transfer successfully into the target language[5]. Learners use this awareness to form strategies of production as well as comprehension in the target language where some L1 items are freely transferred while others are carefully avoided. He introduces the terms "language-neutral" and "language-specific" to refer to the ways in which a learner may perceive and categorise expressions. In Kellerman's own words

> "Idioms, then, are only part of a potentially large class of items which a learner may, at any given moment treat as language-specific. A language-specific item in this sense is a N[ative] L[anguage] feature which the learner tends not to transfer to a given T[arget] L[anguage]. Such features can be contrasted with language-neutral items which the learner believes can be transferred to a given TL. The role of the TL in the assignment of specificity or neutrality is important here because the perceived relationship between NL and TL, will affect the learner's judgements. Thus the specificity of an item is relative and not generally intrinsic. (Kellerman, 1977:102-03)

In other words, the learner perceives certain L1 elements as being uniquely part of L1 and not likely to result in a grammatical utterance if transferred to L2. Other constructions are perceived as not being L1-specific, and thus are more likely to transfer successfully into L2. Of course, how a learner perceives native language constructions is dependent on his or her meta-linguistic awareness, intuitions, etc., but Kellerman argues

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[4] Kellerman and Sharwood Smith (1986:1) point out that "transfer" is not a term broad enough to cover all aspects of L1-influnce on SLA. They emphasize the need for a broader term and suggest "cross-linguistic influence", which subsumes "under one heading such phenomena as 'transfer', 'interference', 'avoidance', 'borrowing' and L2-related aspects of language loss".

[5] Kellerman is never explicit about whether this awareness is conscious or unconscious, but it does not seem implausible that it could be either, depending on the particular structure involved. The effects on the hypothesis of assuming either conscious or unconscious awareness is not readily apparent.

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that linguistic elements are more apt to appear transferable to the learner under the following conditions. First, lexical items which have a sort of "international" status, such as product names or some political terms, are likely to be transferred freely. Second, if the learner perceives the distance between L1 and L2 as not too great, he will be more willing to attempt transfer of certain elements. Third, in the case of idioms, the more transparent the meaning of an idiom, the more likely it is to be considered transferable.

To digress a moment, a very important point one can note here is that the first and third of Kellerman's conditions involve speakers' conceptions of semantic content of the potentially transferable material. As some studies indicate (e.g., Schachter and Rutherford, 1979; Huebner, 1979; Rutherford, 1984), semantics is claimed to play an important and revealing role with regard to SLA. The recognition of the role of L1 semantics in SLA is important here since the transfer of semantic material from L1 to L2, whether positively or negatively, can play a major role in shaping the way some L2 learners process some materials in the target language (see for example, Oskarsson (1975) and Watanabe (1984) who found some evidence for such an argument).

Along with a great deal of anecdotal evidence, Kellerman cites Ringbom and Palmberg (1976) who conducted an investigation in the L2-English of two groups who were already bilingual. Both groups spoke Swedish and Finnish, but while one group recognised Swedish as their L1, the other claimed Finnish. Regardless of L1, each group tended to transfer elements from Swedish into the target language, English, while transfer of Finnish structures was avoided. Kellerman hypothesises that both groups were able to recognise the relative similarity between English and Swedish, as well as the disparity between English and Finnish. As such, they probably felt that transfer from Swedish would not result in ungrammaticality, at least not to the extent that transfer from Finnish would.

Kellerman has also conducted his own experiments, but warns that the results are not conclusive. Kellerman (1977) used a test which consisted of giving a list of English sentences to native speakers of Dutch who were studying English as an L2 in Holland. The sentences contained English idioms as well as Dutch idioms which had been translated into English. In some cases the Dutch translations were equally acceptable in English, in others, they were not. The learners were asked to give grammaticality judgements for the sentences. Kellerman hypothesised that the less proficient students would be less likely to know which idioms were grammatical in English than the more advanced students, but he also designed his test in such a way that it would be possible to recognise whether or not the subjects were responding at random or using certain strategies in their decisions to accept or reject sentences. According to Kellerman, if the less proficient subjects were responding at random, they would be found to have accepted some idioms which were not possible in English, and to have rejected some which were. In fact, Kellerman found that these students overwhelmingly rejected idioms they were unsure of, especially those from Dutch, regardless of whether the idiom was actually possible in English or not. As predicted, the more advanced students fared much better in judging the grammaticality of English idioms irrespective of their status in Dutch. Kellerman recognises the fact that low proficiency itself probably affects the results of his experiment, but argues that since low proficiency students did not respond completely at random, their rejection of idiom transfer reflects their general perception of the distance between L1 and L2. At this stage of L2 development, their linguistic naiveté cautions them against accepting in English elements which they perceive as being specifically Dutch. With an increase in studying time, their linguistic

awareness increases (along with their proficiency) and they are better able to judge that which is possible (or not possible) in the target language.

Jordens (1977) also addresses the question of the role of learner perception of L1 and L2 in transfer. Like Kellerman, he hypothesises that the learner is aware of the relative distance between L1 and L2, and that this knowledge affects his decisions regarding the transfer of L1 structure into L2. Following Bley-Vroman (1983)[6], he claims that IL should be investigated in terms of "...processes and strategies in the L2 acquisition process..." and that IL rules should be described "...in the framework of these processes and strategies." (p.17) One of the strategies identified by Jordens is selectively choosing L1 structures for transfer on the basis of whether or not they are likely to prove successful in L2. As with Kellerman, the key to transfer for Jordens is the way in which the learner perceives the relationship between L1 and L2.

Another evidence of such a hypothesis can be noticed in a recent study by Singler (1988, cited in Odlin, 1989:102) of pidginized forms of Liberian English. He found that speakers of Vai rarely used resumptive pronouns in subject position, while speakers of a language called Dan used them rather frequently. As Singler observes, such tendencies reflect the fact that Vai does not allow resumptive pronouns in subject position, whereas Dan requires such pronouns in the same position.

It is worth emphasising the fact that central to Kellerman's and Jorden's hypotheses is the assumption that a learner's perception of his L1 relative to the target language will figure prominently in his decision to use or disregard certain structures in the target language, and that much of this decision depends on the perception of the semantic content of the L1 item and the likelihood of the item to succeed in L2.

In a separate effort to discuss language transfer, Gass (1979a, 1979b, and 1984), argues that "...those elements which are universally "easier" vis-a-vis the other elements are more likely to be transferred". As an example, consider the universal Accessibility Hierarchy proposed by Keenan and Comrie (1977). On the basis of transfer or cross-linguistic data they claim that (1) there is a hierarchy of relative clause types which a language can relatives and (2) pronominal reflexes are more likely in some hierarchical positions than others. Keenan (1975) suggested that there is intralinguistic validity to the hierarchy as well as cross-linguistic validity, that native speakers "behave" in accordance with the hierarchical principles, finding it "easier" to produce some relative clauses than others. In other words, the more accessible part of the hierarchy was also the part where transfer effects were most likely. Gass (1984) adds that

> "Those positions which were least accessible resulted in greater difficulty for speakers of all language backgrounds: The structures produced reflected universal principles rather than L1-based structures". (p. 127)

For example, Kellerman's (1977) investigation of the lexical items, which was previously discussed, and Gass and Ard's study (1984) of L2 tense/aspect systems. In a test of grammaticality judgements of tense/aspects, Gass and Ard found that those aspects of the L2 tense/aspect system which were closer to a universal core were accepted as grammatical in L2 with significantly greater frequency than those items which were more distant. The more distant items were not accepted even in instances where the native language used the translation equivalent with the same function. According to that, Gass (1984) argues that "language universals serve as an overall guiding principle

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[6]See also Zobl (1980 and 1982).

in SLA, interacting with the native language and the target language systems, at times resulting in violations of a proposed universal, at times being consistent with a given universal." (p. 129)

CONCLUSION

From the discussion of the topic and the studies which have been reviewed in this paper, one can argue that the learner's L1 is an important determinant of SLA. It is not the only determinant, however, and may not be the most important. But it is theoretically unsound to attempt a precise specification of its contribution or even to try to compare its contribution with that of other factors. The L1 is a resource of knowledge which learners will use both positively or negatively to help them sift the L2 data in the input and to perform as best as they can in the L2. If SLA is viewed by some linguists (such as Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, 1982; Ellis, 1986; and many others) as a developmental process then L1 can be viewed as a contributing factor to this development.

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